

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Alice DeWalt Hahn**

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Interviewer: Diane L. Ware

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Location: Mrs. Hahn's home in Houston, Texas

12 Pages



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Alice DeWalt Hahn

Transcript

WARE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

HAHN: My name is Alice Margaret DeWalt Hahn, I was born in Houston, Texas, September 21, 1944.

WARE: Tell me about your father.

HAHN: My father was Thomas Waters DeWalt Jr. He was an attorney with Humble Oil and Refining. He was called a land man. Land men investigated and arranged oil leases.

WARE: Where was your father raised?

HAHN: LaPorte, Texas. He was born in 1917. Mom was born in 1915.

WARE: Your name is Alice Margaret. Who were you named after and why?

HAHN: The Alice was for my great grandmother Alice Miller Dew. Everyone loved Alice "Mama" Dew. From what I understand she was a very dear person, a very kind, quiet person who wanted the best for her children. The Margaret in my name is for my grandmother, Margaret Dew DeWalt Beech.

WARE: Can you think of some examples of how Alice Dew wanted the best for her children?

HAHN: She had one child that seemed to not be quite as...say assertive or maybe having the leadership qualities of the other children. She would go to George Dew who really was the brains behind the Dew operation; he really built the Dew Empire at the time. She would go to George and say, "We really need to get a piece of land for this child." She'd make sure that child was looked after. That was just one example.

WARE: Nice. You have portraits of Alice and Thomas Dew in your home. Do you know when they were done or by whom?

HAHN: I believe they were done at different times. I think perhaps the portraits were actually done from photographs. That's just a guess. Probably after their deaths.

WARE: As her namesake, what experiences do you remember with your grandmother Margaret Dew DeWalt?

HAHN: Challenging is the word I will use.

WARE: Were you close to your grandmother?

HAHN: No, although we saw her very frequently.

WARE: Where did she live in your childhood?

HAHN: In Houston, the same city I lived in.

WARE: Did she ever share any stories about her childhood?

HAHN: She was a great storyteller, but I don't remember any particular stories of her childhood. I remember her sister Aunt Ruth Dew Lalley sharing stories about her. It seemed that when Margaret was small Alice Miller was ill and so Maggie went to live with some cousins in another city. These cousins were boys. She was very valued by the boys. And the mother was thrilled to have a little girl to do things with. That's the only story I remember.

WARE: I presume your grandmother never talked about the Dew house in DeWalt?

HAHN: Not as I remember. But nobody talked about the Dew house because when I was small Aunt Jessie lived there and it was still in operation. It wasn't like it was a past-entity.

WARE: Did Jessie live there by herself at that point?

HAHN: Yes, at that point, she did. George never married and Ruth's first marriage failed. Jessie was a widow and she and Ruth were George's hostesses. He did a lot of entertaining. A lot people from Houston came in their buggies. Or they came in their cars. If the road was muddy they would have to send the mules to pull them out to the house. They were quite social because George knew that's what it was going to take to move in business. They knew the movers and shakers in Houston. They belonged to the Houston Club. Aunt Ruth went into Houston to school. She went to San Jacinto High School, which was quite a prestigious high school at the time. She knew the Tobbs' and she knew the Kirby girls because she had gone into town to school.

WARE: When she went to San Jacinto high school where did she live, do you think?

HAHN: I think they commuted. I don't know but I think so because Lilly Veal, who's father was George's sibling, actually moved to Houston so she could go to Houston schools. I just don't remember Aunt Ruth mentioning that she stayed with Lilly Veal in high school.

WARE: I'm going to ask you about some of your grandmother's siblings in case you remember anything about certain people. What do you remember about Walter Dew?

HAHN: I remember Uncle Walter's ostrich boots. I know that sounds bizarre, but I do. He would always come for Christmas when we were children and mother was a very gracious hostess and he really didn't have any place to go. He didn't have children; he wasn't married at that time. He would have a straight shot of liquor; I think it was whiskey, Bourbon, and he would drink it straight from that shot glass. I remember that and the ostrich boots. They had the little dots from the feathers on them and they were unusual. It was quite a luxurious item. He was a rancher and a very silent kind of man... very quite. I remember him as being long and lanky. I also remember that he was bald. All the Dew men were bald. I remember Aunt Ruth mentioning that a friend's child said, "Why do all the Dew men wear hats?" "It's because they were bald." Every picture of a Dew man has got a hat on.

WARE: What about Mae Robinson?

HAHN: Okay, Aunt Mae...this is just my reflection; a little stern, a little less congenial than Ruth and Jessie. Very pragmatic, very practical but loving to her granddaughters, Linda, who friends called Muffie, and June and of course her daughter "Little" Jessie. She just doted on them. That's the memory I have of her.

WARE: Was her husband still living when you were a child?

HAHN: No, I think he was deceased. I remember her being in that house in Missouri City by herself at that point. I think she had housekeeper or a companion who stayed with her because she was getting older but that's all I can remember.

WARE: What about her daughter, Jessie Robinson Maroney.

HAHN: I remember "Little" Jessie, as we called her, as a child growing up in Houston. Our school got to go to symphony and "Little" Jessie was one of the volunteers. I remember thinking, "Wow, somebody I know has something to do with the symphony." I remember her being active in community, with the fine arts.

WARE: Tell me more about Jessie Dew Agnew.

HAHN: Aunt Jessie did everything just like Aunt Ruth, beautifully. She entertained beautifully, lovely, lovely occasions and people really looked forward to coming to her home. I remember in particular she did the New Years parties, delicious hors d'oeuvres and at midnight she served a beautiful breakfast. It was several courses and it would take a couple of hours. We sat down to the large dining room table that had been in the governor's mansion. I felt pretty special to sit at that table.

WARE: Which governor mansion...which governor, do you know?

HAHN: Don't have a faintest, sorry.

WARE: About what years were those New Years parties?

HAHN: Oh gosh, I am going to say about 1966 until her death which was I think 1969. Aunt Jessie died, Aunt Mae died, "Little" Jessie died and my mother died within a year's period of time. Our family had a lot of losses; I kind of block that out of my memory.

WARE: What about Ruth Dew Lalley? Tell me some more about her.

HAHN: She was really very active in the community. She was a founding member of the Missouri City Women's Club. She was a founding member of the historical society and she was a founding member of the Fort Bend County Cancer Society. She had watched her father suffer from cancer and watched her mother suffer because she couldn't do anything to help him. That made such an impression on her that it became her cause. I remember in the late 1940s she would make trips from Sugar Land taking people into town to get cancer treatment. She would provide the transportation. She would drive her car and take them for treatments and bring them back. She knew Dr. Bertner of Bertner Drive. He's the one who approached her as far as joining the state organization for the cancer society and becoming either a board member or maybe a founding member.

She was very active in all those things and I can remember in those days, early 1950s, those were long distance calls from Missouri City to Houston. That was on her personal phone bill and she paid for those phone calls, never was reimbursed. She did a lot of traveling for the cancer society as a volunteer. She was always very proud of Fort Bend County and the fact that they could raise as much money as the other counties. She wanted to make sure Fort Bend was keeping up with the state board members' county contributions.

WARE: Several of your grandmother's siblings and half siblings died before you born. I thought maybe you could share some the family shared stories about them. What about Doctor Hugh Dew who was Lily's father?

HAHN: Right, Dr. Dew. I can remember him being talked about because of his boldness in moving as far from Missouri City as Houston! It seemed to me to take some courage.

WARE: What about his wife, Ada Cymantha "Mantie" Dew?

HAHN: I remember Aunt Mantie. She lived with Lily Veal after Mr. Dew's death and when we would go visit. My parents were friends so we would actually go to their house in Missouri City on Bull Lane and Aunt Mantie would be there. So I vaguely remember her. I can remember seeing her and how kind Lily Veal was to her mother and of course Brink. It is a caring relationship when you take someone into your home.

WARE: Tell me more about Lily Brinkman.

HAHN: Oh Lily Veal, that is what we called her, and she was dynamic. She was a little short lady and just very busy. I am going to call her a homebody in that she viewed her role as supporting her husband, Brink. He, as I remember, was active. I think he might have had a city council position but I am not sure. Whatever he did she wanted to support him. When they moved from Bull Lane into the land close to the creek, he had a huge garden and he would have all these wonderful vegetables. Everybody would come out and get these vegetables and she would spend days and days and days putting up the vegetables. Since he had grown them she felt obligated to care for them. They also had a son, Hugh Lewis, who had been a brilliant, brilliant young man and lived at home. She always took great care to make sure Hugh Lewis was included in everything.

WARE: What about your great uncle Henry Dew, ever hear anything about him?

HAHN: I don't remember Uncle Henry. I remember his wife's daughter, his wife's name was Jimmie. I remember Aunt Jimmie in that lovely house. We went out one time and she gave me a china doll and I still have the doll! I remember that she had beautiful clothing and that's what I remember about Aunt Jimmie.

WARE: Where was their house at that time?

HAHN: It was in Missouri City but I couldn't put my finger on where. It seems like it was kind of out in the country, they had acreage and I think they sold it to Bud Adams, but don't quote me on that. Somebody else will have more information on that one.

WARE: You touched upon George Dew, tell me some more about him.

HAHN: I guess the description we'll use is a mover and a shaker. He was a wheeler-dealer but a very honorable man. Very adventurous as far as being a risk taker. An entrepreneur, they were a very fortunate family. Aunt Ruth would talk about some years where they didn't make a crop and things were slim pickings, as we say in Texas. They carried on, as if everything was the same; they never let anyone know that they had hard times. They were very proud and they were also very fortunate. When the cattle and cotton were scarce they hit oil and he had bought lots of land. So they always had a piece of land they could sell. They could get rid of a piece land and have enough money to tide them over if it was short year. Again, he looked after his family in an almost paternal way even though he was the brother and, really, for Aunt Ruth his half sister.

WARE: Did you ever hear anything about Frank Dew?

HAHN: Yes, I did. In fact I met someone that knew him. When she was a child she met Frank and said that he was as handsome as any Hollywood movie star. That he was really a very attractive man. From what Aunt Ruth said, he always had a special place in Mama Dew's heart whether because of his good looks or whether he had a way with words I don't know. I am going to have to say he was a ladies man because he was attractive. He actually helped found the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Again they were doing things that would help their cattle business. They knew Reese Locket, Tom Booth, Joe Hughes, Albert Lee, J. D. Sartwell. It was such a smaller community then.

WARE: They were active in the Houston community.

HAHN: Right and that's kind of amazing seeing how they lived out in Missouri City and it was not an easy trip then. The roads were not like they are now. You couldn't go from Houston to Missouri City in twenty minutes; I am guessing it took more, say an hour because the roads were not very good. They knew that's what it took to make the contacts so they did what they had to do. Aunt Ruth and Aunt Jessie, both shopped at Jamails and that was quite an unusual thing at the time. Especially to come from the country and that's what Missouri City was then, the country. They came into town to shop for groceries; they wanted the finest and that was where you went for the finest. In those days you'd go into Jamails and you would see all the people in society or monied people in Houston.

Either they were there or their chauffeur or their house keeper or their cook. Of course the big joke was their cooks didn't know how to cook! They thought THEY were the only ones who knew how to cook and they did. They didn't actually cook but their cooks knew how to cook (laughing).

WARE: Do you remember who was Aunt Jessie and Aunt Ruth's cook when your were a child?

HAHN: I remember Aunt Ruth's cook was Sadie Tribble. She was ahead of her time as far as I can remember. She would add sugar to green beans. I know this is a silly memory, but I didn't understand why you would do that. Later on in biology I read that plants produce this green stuff and it's really a sugar. By adding sugar it helped keep it green. I thought, "Well, Sadie was pretty smart!" And she was. She had her own personality I can tell you that.

WARE: Give me an example of Sadie's personality.

HAHN: She always had a great big smile!

WARE: How often did you go out to the Dew house in DeWalt?

HAHN: It was called the Big House. As a child we did not go very often; maybe two or three times.

WARE: After your childhood?

HAHN: As an adult quite frequently. More times to Aunt Ruth's, which was down the road. I am going to say maybe every couple of months. Each of them had their own separate activities but they would do things a lot together at that point.

WARE: What occasions would you go out to the house?

HAHN: If Jessie was having Sunday dinner or for the New Year's Eve parties. She did have a lovely party for us before we got married,

WARE: Tell me about the party before you got married.

HAHN: It was just beautiful. Just like the New Years Eve party, just beautiful and of course all people from Houston attended. We were used to the Aunt Ruth and Jessie's parties and when we would go to Houston parties we'd think this food was not very good. We were used to this wonderful, wonderful food!

WARE: Can you give me some examples of the types of food that your Aunt Jessie would serve?

HAHN: Lets see, prime rib, Nancy's wonderful Kasha, fried green tomatoes, she had to have grits for New Years and, of course, black eyed peas. Aunt Ruth did a crab mousse. I don't know if Aunt Jessie did that one. It's still a family favorite. Those are the main things that stick in my mind. Really good meat and fresh vegetable, always fresh.

WARE: How were the meals served?

HAHN: Everything on silver platters or beautiful serving dishes. If it was china it was really good china.

WARE: Family style, buffet?

HAHN: New Years was buffet. If it was a Sunday lunch where it was a smaller number it seems like maybe the plates were served but we may have passed the dishes. That one's vague.

WARE: What memories do you have of the house itself? What impressed you about it?

HAHN: I can remember they had a huge old parrot on the back porch. I remember the 'call bell' outside which they used to call the help in for lunch. And the front was what I'll call the men's salon with the brass rail and that dark paneling and a slot machine. The slot machine was a biggie.

WARE: The men's salon as you came into the house, it was to the right? And it had a slot machine.

HAHN: It had a slot machine, a bar with a brass rail and dark paneling. That was something so unusual for me. We grew up in a small, two-bedroom house in Bellaire, needless to say before Bellaire was trendy. Bellaire was out of the Houston city limits when I grew up.

WARE: So you came in the Dew house and you turn to the right and that entire room was dark paneling?

HAHN: Well, you pass through the dining room to get to the salon.

WARE: The only person you ever remember living in the house...?

HAHN: Was Aunt Jessie, yes.

WARE: Earlier you mentioned your childhood confusion over DeWalt and Dew. Could you explain the differences to me?

HAHN: Yes, I couldn't understand why the Dews lived in DeWalt and the DeWalt's lived other places, like my grandfather DeWalt lived in LaPorte. Aunt Dannie, who was a DeWalt, lived in Missouri City. This is very confusing. From what I understand part of the DeWalt family had actually lived in DeWalt in the early days. They had the DeWalt Plantation and the DeWalt Cemetery remains. The gentleman died and his widow could not keep the plantation going so she left but the DeWalt name stayed. Then the Dew brothers came in the late 1890s, somewhere in there. I think George was first and he brought the rest of the family. I don't think Tristan, his dad, was first. I think George was first to DeWalt. I believe they were in Comfort, Texas before. I would ask Mother, "Are we related to so and so?" She would say, "Honey, you're related to everybody in Fort Bend County so just smile and be nice." That wasn't really true, but it seemed like it. Of course, Mom was an outsider too, so I am sure it was almost as confusing for her.

WARE: You have a beautiful shawl that belonged to your great Aunt Ruth and she is wearing it in a portrait. Do you know the origin of that shawl or anything about the portrait?

HAHN: Yes, I do. Her brother, Frank, was in the tank corps in World War I and brought the shawl from France.

WARE: Specifically for Ruth?

HAHN: I'm assuming so since in the picture that I have of her with the shawl she was quite young and quite proud of the shawl.

WARE: Did she ever tell you anything else about the shawl?

HAHN: No she didn't. She had a medallion made out of his tank corps emblem. She had a picture of him in his army uniform. I was the one who put together the shawl and the picture since they were the same and kind of went together.

WARE: The picture is probably right after World War I.

HAHN: That would be my guess, yes.

WARE: Do you remember anything about a store in the DeWalt area?

HAHN: I remember visiting Dew Mercantile as a child. The store was on the other side, right next to the railroad tracks down the road a piece as we would say, from the big house. I remember it vaguely, as a child. It was kind of amazing to me. I don't remember who ran it. I think they had someone run it, I don't think Aunt Jessie or Aunt Ruth ran the store.

WARE: What type of things do you remember in the store?

HAHN: It was mercantile so that would have been more like household goods and some fabrics. I have a thread chest that I believe was from the store. When I say a chest, it was two drawers.

WARE: Do you remember anything about the Hutchins family?

HAHN: I remember them being spoken of. I remember Aunt Ruth talking about them, but not anything in particular. Perhaps they ran the store, I don't know.

WARE: Did you ever hear about or experience any ghostly activity in the Dew house?

HAHN: No.

WARE: How did you feel when you learned the Dew house might be demolished?

HAHN: Sad.

WARE: Why?

HAHN: I will say that I went to the house after all of Aunt Jessie's things were out and I truly realized that the person made the house rather than vice versa. It was having seen it minus all her lovely things. Her husband had been a colonel in the army and I believe they had at one point been stationed in San Francisco so she had some really exotic things; from China, lovely oriental chest and hangings and very unusual things. Minus all those things it was just four walls so it was easier to let it go. In its day it truly was...well, it was called the "Big House". When there were storms people came to that house to ride out storms so it had seen a lot of mileage, I guess. It had been so active in the community that it was sad to see it go.

WARE: Did you attend the farewell celebration in August 2005?

HAHN: I did. I thought that was a wonderful occasion to say goodbye; it was kind of a wake for the house, as we knew it. I'm really, really grateful for Muffie; I know she spent lots and lots and lots of time to find ways to save it. When the house is redone it will be done in period but it won't have Aunt Jessie's wonderful things in it.

WARE: I want to thank you for your time and end our interview.